



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 70

COAST GUARD ANTHRAX VACCINE IMMUNIZATION PROGRAM UPDATE

On 11 May 1999 the Coast Guard formally implemented its Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program (CG AVIP) with the release of ALCOAST 032/99 "CG AVIP." Before this, while deployed as part of a Navy task force in March 1998, approximately 170 service members had been immunized with the anthrax vaccine. Of this three-phase program, the Coast Guard is currently in Phase 1, which will immunize members scheduled to deploy to a high-threat area. The Secretary of Defense has identified the Korean peninsula, Southwest Asia, and their respective contiguous waters as high-threat areas, including the countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, and Yemen.

Phase 2, anticipated to begin not before late FY 2000, requires immunizing Coast Guard alert forces, i. e., those units that on short notice could deploy to one of the high-threat areas. Phase 2 will be conducted over approximately two years, with units with the greatest likelihood of such deployment immunized first. As part of the Total Force Health Protection Plan, Phase 3 is scheduled to begin in FY 03 and will immunize other service members not already in the program.

As part of the overall effort to provide factual information to our Coast Guard men and women, Commandant (G-WK) has designed and activated a CG AVIP Web site: http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-w/g-wk/g-wkh/g-wkh-1/uscg_anthrax_vaccine_program.htm. This site provides relevant information, including educational briefing materials, and links to many other web sites. It is imperative all unit leaders and medical personnel become familiar with this program and the most accurate information available. Commanding officers and officers-in-charge are responsible for ensuring each service member is briefed about the threat of anthrax, the vaccine's safety and effectiveness, and the CG immunization program. The briefings on the CG AVIP web site have been developed for unit commanders', other senior leaders', and CG medical personnel's use.

As you may be aware, the Internet has many sites providing information on anthrax and the anthrax vaccine; some of this information is accurate; some is not. The CG AVIP site provides the CG member factual information, useful educational materials and links to many military, government, and non-government sites with further beneficial information and resources. However, I am concerned about the numerous sites providing misinformation on the anthrax vaccine and the immunization program. On reviewing and analyzing these sites, it is apparent much of the negative information being circulated either misrepresents or fabricates facts to mislead a population with minimal medical or scientific background.

Let me give you an example of how this misrepresentation occurs. The product insert for the Anthrax vaccine states studies have not been performed to see whether the anthrax vaccine has cancer-causing action or any effect on fertility. To the medically uneducated this statement may appear threatening. However, this statement appears in the product insert of almost all vaccines licensed for use in the United States -- vaccines our service members and their family members commonly use. This same statement also appears in the product information of many medications we commonly use, such as hydrocortisone cream, ampicillin antibiotic, Benadryl antihistamine, and xylocaine (similar to novacaine). Does this statement mean these vaccines and other medications cause cancer or sterility (infertility)? Certainly not; it only means these medications have not been formally studied for these factors. This is a common approach in developing and licensing medications in the U.S. However, physicians have used all these licensed medications, including the anthrax vaccine, extensively for decades with no indication any of them cause cancer or infertility.

Unfortunately, many Internet sites that attempt to discourage our service members from receiving the anthrax vaccine do not explain this fact. They simply say the anthrax vaccine has not been studied and therefore could make you sterile so you shouldn't take it. They do not tell you this is a common statement on many medications we commonly use. They do not tell you the vaccine has been used extensively since 1970 with no evidence to suggest a potential to cause cancer or sterility. They do not tell you more than 1500 workers at the U.S. Army Research Institute of Infectious Disease have received this vaccine for the last 10-25 years with their annual follow-ups showing no indication of cancer or infertility.

I caution you to apply a rational, reasonable mind when reviewing these unofficial web sites, which proffer many "scary" stories -- so-called "urban legends." These stories generally take the approach, "I heard of someone who..." or "A buddy of mine said he heard...". Because these stories appear on the Internet they seem legitimate. Careful investigation of these stories generally shows they either did not occur as stated or more likely could not occur based on known scientific fact. A story recently circulating "officially" through the Coast Guard is about a nameless AF pilot who told someone else he had the shot. A few days later he and his wife felt ill and their doctor found "traces of anthrax and the Ebola virus in his blood and traces of anthrax in his wife's blood." From a scientific standpoint this is impossible for two reasons. One: it is impossible to test for Ebola virus except at the CDC and USAMRIID. Second: this pilot purportedly showed traces of two of the deadliest diseases known to man, either of which would have made him very sick and likely killed him within hours to days. The anthrax vaccine contains no live or dead bacteria. You cannot get anthrax from receiving the vaccine. You cannot make someone else sick after you receive the vaccine.

In summary:

Experience demonstrates thousands of people have used the FDA-approved anthrax vaccine safely and successfully for more than 30 years.

The Internet provides factual medical and program administration information from several sources.

Reach them through the CG AVIP web site at http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-w/g-wk/g-wkh/g-wkh-1/uscg_anthrax_vaccine_program.htm or the Department of Defense AVIP web site at <http://www.anthrax.osd.mil/>.

The Internet also provides misinformation about the anthrax vaccine and the AVIP. I encourage you to educate yourself on the medical facts, the threat anthrax presents, and the reasons for the CG AVIP. Be skeptical of sites employing scare tactics and urban legends. Ask questions and become informed.

Regards, FL Ames



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